POOR DOCUMENT

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THE SURPRISE PARTY - -

By P. V. Migles

An air of mystery pervaded Tid Flack's dingy litle cobbler shop on the night of the final conspiracy, for Tid, Jimmie Sutt, Malin Crowe, and Henry Dole, the inmates, were not only particularly silent at the door, but their shadows were cast upon the walls in prodigious size by the sickly little lamp beside the cobbler's knee, and their looks suggested guilt.

King came in there impatiently. His mood was one of scorn for all the gathered company and their plans, yet beneath it lay curiosity of exceptional significance. He looked the assemblage over with a certain air of superiority, and studied Tid Flack's countenance with scant respect.

"Well," he said, after a moment of impressive silence, "I just dropped in as I was passin' by, fer I didn't reckon to attend no regular meeting. I only thought I'd see if you old ninnies was still foolin' 'round to git up a-jack-legged soiree up to Mrs. Hanks.'"

The rawboned lumbermen stirred on their seats uneasily. All looked to cobbler Flack for defense of their present position. Tid coughed behind his hand.

"No, King, we ain't contemplatin' anything gaudy or Shakesperious," he replied with gravity. "We're preparin' a homemade surprise party—just a reg'lar oldfashioned supprise party—for little Dunny Weaver, and we thought, as you was sort of sweet on his sister, why—"

"Turn that off, Flack, turn it off!" interrupted King vehemently. "Shut down your head-gate right where you are. I ain't been around there no more than any of these other galoots—and none of us ain't done very fancy, anyhow. What's more, you don't know a supprise party when you see it. Supprise party? Rats! you've been talkin' about the racket for the last three days and everybody into camp knows the thing is comin'."

"Tid ain't told nobody but little Dnnny," said Malin Crowe; "and, besides, there'll be a supprise part, don't you worry."

"You always have to tell the suppris-ee," added Flack sagely. "Women hate to be really surprised. They don't git time to crimp their hair, or wash the back of their neck. And one uncrimped woman kin sour the whole shebang."

"And if you don't tell the supprisers, then how kin they bring refreshments?" inquired Jimmie Sutt. "And how kin you have a party without nothin' to eat?"

"That's why we're goin' to have the candy-pull tonight," added Henry Dole. "Refreshments don't grow on every tree in camp."

"Candy-pull?" echoed Thomas King. "Where? Who's goin' to make the candy?"

"The whole crowd, over to Jimmie's," answered Crowe. "He's got a fire goin' now. And the pop-corn's right here in this bag." He indicated a barley-sack with more than a bushel of corn init. King stared at it hungrily. Then he looked at each of the men in turn; he was itching to be one of the party.

"Well, I suppose if you gentlemen know how to run a candy-pull," he said, "why, you might not need me along. But in case you want any pointers, why—"

He waited without concluding his sentence.

"Sure shot you ought to help!" said Jimmie Sutt. "We can't have too much savvy when it comes to makin' candy. I don't claim to know it all myself."

"Neither do I," confessed Henry Dole. "I only know you've got to butter your paws when you pull it."

"We expected you to come, King, to sort of diagnose the candy," added Flack. "If she ain't diagnosed she may not be done, and when she ain't done she ain't candy—she's gravy."

"Well, of course I know two or three ways of tellin' when it's done," said King, "and I don't mind steerin' you straight."

"Then we'll go right now," decided the cobbler, promptly blowing out the lamp.

"Don't fergit this here pop-corn," admonished Malin Crowe. "Here, Dole, you take it. I've got to go up to my shack fer about fifteen minutes, and then I'll join you all at Jimmie's."

But instead of going up the slope to his own dark cabin, Mr. Crowe slipped quietly down to the house where Mistress Julia Fothergill was reading, alone, in her kitchen.

He paused outside the window, and, studying the figure of the buxom young woman within, decided she was not so very homely after all. She was a vast improvement on no girl, and something had told him it was vain to aspire to the hand of Dunny Weaver's sister, at the Hanks'.

His knock on the door startled Miss Julia prodigiously. He entered the room to find her standing by the table and staring toward him in extreme agitation.

"Why, Malin Crowe, is it only you?" she stammered in confusion. "I thought—I was just a-readin' how the villain, Lord Gnashleigh, come sneakin' in on the unsuspectin' Dora, which was really Lady Dovecote, and my heart near jumped out on the table—and it's only you after all, and what d'you want, anyhow, I'd like to know?"

Malin Crowe had snatched off his hat. His face was very red, his smile sickly.

"Huh! I ain't no villain, Julia, you bet your boots," he said reassuringly. "I'm the other feller in the story. I—I come down to ask—to ask—to— Say, Julia, let's you and be git married. If you'll be my wife, I'll be your husband."

Julia pulled a hairpin from her dark tresses and shut her book upon it to keep her place. Then she turned to lok at Malin calmly, her two big hands on her hips.

"Well, if I ever!" she said. "I didn't think you'd be like the others, Malin Crowe, but I might have known you'd git sick of snoopin' around that Miss Weaver pretty soon, for you didn't have no more business there than a frog has got in the soup. And after you've all got white around the gills, you and Jimmie Sutt and Hen Dole and baldheaded Tom King think it's time to come and pop to Julia, hey? Well, I scorn your advancin', Mr. Crowe. I don't hanker after Crowe. And if Tid ain't so pretty nor so terrible big, and if I did tell him I'd have to think it over, why, anyways he didn't wait for no Miss Weaver to look right past him before he thought of me. And you kin git, Malin Crowe, for I'm right in the middle of the most excitin' part, and the real prince is the one which nobody suspicions, all the time."

Crowe looked at the girl in utter bewilderment. "Do you mean you won't do it?" he asked incredulously. "You won't be my darlin' little wife?"

"Well, I should say I won't!" answered Julia, with emphasis. "Don't you understand no English conversation?"

"But it would be such a bully supprise to all the boys," pleaded Crowe. "There won't be no surprise if you don't."

"Well, it'll supprise me terrible if I do," replied Miss Fothergill. "And I don't desire to hear no further prolongation of the painful scene. I am aware of the honor you're doin' me, sir, but blandishments and arguments in vain. Farewell! That's all; don't stand there no more. And shut the door without slammin', 'cause a glass is loose in the winder. So, good night, Malin, and pleasant dreams to you."

Malin was stunnned, but he went, and all the way to the candy-pull he was pondering Julia's revelations. The state of her mind was beyond him. When he came to Jimmie Sutt's, however, the rich aroma of boiling molasses and half-done candy burning in drops on the top of the stove stole soothingly upon his senses and renewed his faith in the sweetness of life.

"Here he is now," said Henry Dole, as Malin entered the cabin. "Say, Crowe, didn't you say we'd ought to stir in some bakin'-powder when she's done, to make her nice and white, and to poke the cloves into her while she was bein' pulled?"

"Yep, that's the way we always done it to home," answered Crowe. "Who says any different?"

"Well, I didn't dispute your receipt," replied Thomas King; "but I said I'd et molasses candy which didn't have no foreign substances into it."

"And the rest of us agrees it wouldn't be no good without cloves and cinamon and nutmeg and just a leetle touch of whisky fer we ain't got no vaniller," added Jimmie Sutt. "We don't want her to taste like Sunday-school chewin'-gum. We want the real article."

Tid Flack was standing by the red-hot stove, diligently stirring the boiling mess which the boys had created. The fumes and the heat were slowly overwhelmng his brain. Crow took a look at the viscid mixture and drew in a mighty noseful of its fragrance.

"Smells like the kitchen part of heaven," he said. "What's in her besides molasses?"

"A spoonful of Worcestershire and half a cup of ketchup and some pickle juice—'cause we didn't have no vinegar—five cups of sugar and half a cup of condensed milk," answered Jimmie Sutt proudly. "We wanted her rich—and durn the expense."

"No eggs?" inquired Crowe; "not a single egg?"

The men looked from one to another like guilty children.

"We never thought of eggs," confessed Henry Dole. "Jimmie, have you got any eggs"

"No," said Jimmie, "nary an egg in the shack."

"'Well," said Thomas King, "I've seen molasses candy before that was made without eggs. It ain't so smooth, but it goes pretty good. Let's see if she's done."

He took the spoon from the cobbler's hand, dipped out a generous dose of the boiling candy and dropped it into a dipper of water. It sank to the bottom and hardened to the consistency of flint. All the cooks gathered about King while he loosened the black mass from the bottom of the dipper. Meanwhile the mess on the stove was burning industriously.

"She's just about ready," announces the diagnostician, lifting the dripping nodule of stuff from the water. "Grease your pan—grease your pan! She'll be done in just two minutes!"

The receptacle they smeared with bacon-fat was a gold-pan which had once done service in washing gravel in a mining-camp. It was large, strong, and three inches deep, with a widely flaring rim. Into its hold the seething, volcanic confestion was poured, and cobbler Tid Flack sat down to watch it cool for pulling, while the others made clumsy preparations to pop their bushel of corn.

They were a long time making ready, and the candy was stubbornly retentive of its heat. Above it Tid Flack held his head upon his hand, while the warmth increased his drowsiness and the rich, heavy fragrance cloyed his senses. He nodded, pulled himself up with a jerk, then nodded again above the pool of stuff. He did his very utmost to force his eyes wide open, yet the voices of the others served rather to soothe than excite him, and peace engulfed his being—a peace deliciously scented by the candy.

Meantime, his companions had burned a whole popperful of corn. While they wrangled and exchanged information concerning the art of popping the kernels, Tid Flack had utterly succumbed to the goddess of sleep. Down, down sank his chin upon his breast; then down, down sank his body, till at last his head, with its tangle of thick, wiry hair, was pillowed in the great pool of candy, into the warm, yielding substance of which it sank to a depth of at least two inches.

Comforted, almost narcotized, by the delights of his rest, Tid at length began to snore. One of the boys engrossed with the corn suddenly recalled the fact that candy must be pulled before it hardens.

"Hey, Tid," he called, "how's she coolin'?"

Then he cast a glance in Tid's direction and was all but petrified with horror.

"'Boys!" he yelled at the top of his voice, "boys, look at Tid in the candy!"

The bays looked; then chaos reigned. All bawled in fury or astonishment, three ran to part the pan and Tid, and the corn on the stove was left to fill the house with is reek.

At the first savage pounce upon the pan and his neck, Tid Flack was rudely awakened.

"Git out of that! Git out! Git out!" cried King, who was proud of the candy.

He had snatched the pan, even as Sutt had gripped the cobbler, and both were instantly tugging with lusty might and main.

Tid yelled. His head was thoroughly cemented in the pan, the candy having hardened till a cold-chisel only could have cut it. To save his precious scalp, if not indeed his entire superstructure, Flack laid frantic hold upon the pan and wrestled against the candy's parents wildly.

"Leave go! Leave go!" he shrieked in his anguish. "I'm stuck! You're pullin' off my neck!"

King and Sutt beheld that this was so. Excited as they were, they realized that Tid and the candy had amalgamated into one compact mass that utterly defied the rescue of either one, even by violent measures.

"Well, what in hell was you doin'?" demanded King. "Look at you! Look at the candy! What we goin' to do?"

"Do? Why it's plumb pizened!" declared one of the men.

"I didn't mean to—I must have fell asleep," answered Tid, still fervently clutching the rim of the pan with both his hands, as if it had been a metal hat. "I'm stuck, and it's getting harder all the time."

"Yes, and what's the use of tryin' to save the candy now" demanded Henry Dole. "It's spoiled and ruined forever!"

"I don't see why," answered Jimmie Sutt. We ought to be able to get it off of Tid all right, and a little bit of hair-oil ain't so bad. We'd have to grease our hands to pull it anyhow."

"Don't you pull it again! Don't you touch it!" cried Tid, retreating backward from the savagely disappointed group. "You'll have to take it off easy."

"We've got to git it off the best way we kin. You ain't a-goin' to hog it all," said Malin Crowe. "It's too darn good to be wasted, and I ain't had a smell. And we needn't tell anybody nuthin' about Tid's hair."

"It's all the molasses I had," said Jim-Sutt. "Of all the rotten shames I ever seen, this is the worst."

"I'll tell you," said King; "we can't lift it off the way it is, but a little bit of water would loosen her up and never hurt the candy to speak of. It's awful hard to spoil good molasses candy. So, Tid, you set down and we'll throw a little water up around your hair and wash her loose."

"That's it. I knowed we could think up a way to git it off all right," said Dole, more hopefully. "Where's the dipper?"

Not without misgivings, Tid sat down, still holding to the pan with steadfast purpose, and King fetched the diper, filled with water. He placed it on the table and looked up under the rim of the pan, the better to direct his liberating efforts.

"Stuck all round, hard as rushes in the ice," he announced; "but I guess this'll fetch her."

Taking the dipper in his hand, he dashed the water upward, under the pan, just as Tid sprang to his feet. Gasping and frantic, Tid yelled:

"Help! Help! Oh, Lord! Oh, where's a towel?"

"Set down!" commanded Thomas King. "You ain't in swimmin'. Let us see if the candy's got softer."

Tid was plumped down in his chair and the boys tried to urge his hair and the candy to part. But, except for the shallowest film of softened stuff on its surface, the confection was quite as acamantine as before. Tid yelled and fought as they tried to take it off, and finally escaped to the end of the room, holding to the pan upon his head.

"I've got some rights!" he shouted; "I've got some rights, and it won't come off without my head."

"We've got to wet her again," declared Jimmie Sutt. "Maybe two or three times will do the biz."

"I ain't goin' to let you douse me again for all the candy in the world," said Tid. "Some kinds of candy ain't worth it, and anyway I don't believe this is extry good. I can taste it runnin' down my face."

"You're tastin' more face than anything else, and of course that's pretty fermented," answered Henry Dole. "You bet that candy's worth savin'!"

Tid was therefore persuaded to undergo one more attempt at the water-cure, which shocked him even more than the first. Drenched, dripping with sticky ooze that trickled from the candy down across his countenance like muddy tears, the little cobbler was a saddening spectacle on whom his companions gazed with mingled indignation and despair, since the candy still adhered to its own.

"We can't do it that way," agreed Thomas King, when Tid had shrieked out a wild refusal to submit to one more trial of the bath; "but we might be able to chip it out with a hatchet and save the pieces."

"No, you don't!" said Tid. "You'll want to put in some giant powder next. You fellers think I'm just a plaything; that's what the matter."

"Huh!" said Malin Crowe, whose mind was working peculiarly. "By gum!"

"I don't see why we need no candy fer the party nohow," said Dole, becoming discouraged anew. "Can't we git along without it, and let Tid take it home?"

"Oh, hang the surprise party to a sour-apple tree!" answered Thomas King. "I was goin' to work up a genuine surprise, but Julia Fothergill is gittin' so stuck on snide, tin-horn heroes in ten-cent novels that she don't know a good thing when it bumps her house."

"You bet she don't," agreed Jimmie Sutt. "I know all about that myself." And he winked with profound significance.

"Yep, I got a dose tonight myself," admited Malin Crowe. "She ain't got no use fer any of the gang, unless it's —— Say, King, come over here a minute. I want to speak to you."

The two retired to a corner. Meantime, Tid was holding to the rim of his pan in fear his companions might wrest the candy from him still by some violent manoeuvre. Sutt and Dole were utterly despondent. After a moment of consultation, Crowe and King summoned all but Tid to their corner.

"Say, boys," said Crowe, sotto voce, "it seems like we all got left on Julia Fothergill, and I got it last, and she gave herself plumb away tonight and said old Tid had bin and asked her first of all to be his blushin' bride. And she made a crack about him bein' a prince or dook in disguise. So me and King is goin' to fetch her up here to the shack and let her see the dook in all his glory. And if that don't cook somebody's goose and give 'em a bang-up surprise party, why I'll eat your hat raw, without no gravy nor salt. So keep him here guessin', and we'll be back in less than half a shake."

Tid became suspicious without delay. He still believed the boys attached much value to the candy. King and Crowe departed forthwith, and Sutt and Dole declared they had gone on a scheme to save the confection by a perfectly painless process. Tid, however, would have fled to his cabin, candy, pan, and all, had his friends not prevented the move.

The fire in the stove subsided, then went out altogther. Tid was waxing wroth and worried and the whole affair was assuming an aspect of gloom and alarm, when presently the door was opened and in came Julia Fothergill, with King and Crowe and three other men of the camp, who had followed to behold the cobbler's dilemma and the scorn of the woman who would find him so utterly absurd.

For a moment there was silence in the cabin. Then came the surprise. Julia had no sense of humor. The rescue of Tid from cruelty, oppression, and wrong appealed to her womanly nature. His candy-streaked countenance depicted woe unutterable. Julia nearly cried. Then, wildly indignant at those she conceived to be his persecutors, and filled with romantic tenderness and yearning over the wholly wretched little cobbler, she turned upon the others with a burst of scorn that fairly made them wither where they stood. In her novel she had read, three times over, a truly pyrotechnic explosion of wrath from the lips of a heroine, majestic at the end of most exasperating iniquities, and this, and this, and much more, she vehemently discharged, till the candy-makers crystallized with dread.

"Toads ye are, and unclean monsters!" she concluded superbly. "The low hyenas of the jungle, ashamed of nuthin' mean or cowardly, and fillin' their carcasses with awful which the king of beasts has left, would creep from your society with loathin' and disgust. Ye have done your worst, ye have groveled in the mire and slime of your own base manufacture, and now ye are nipped in the bud. Outcasts of decency, ye can writhe underneath my contempt! I leave ye to your hellish joys and devices. And don't ye come down to my house no more, for coyotes would be better company, and ye make me sick way down to my feet!"

Then, sweeping the cowed and smileless group with one blasting glance, she placed her big red arm about the cobbler's waist and, with Tid holding fast to the pan of candy on his head, strode proudly with him from the place.

And, strangely enough, when she had placed the pan upon her table, with Tid patiently crooked over above it, and then with warm water soaked him away from the mess, as a stamp is soaked from paper, the man became even more precious in her sight than before, while the rich confection was haughtily thrown outside, upon the unclean earth.

And it came to pass that on the evening previously scheduled for the surprise party, two gay persons only marched upon the home of the Hanks with festive intentions. One was the radiant Miss Julia Fothergill, bearing a large frosted cake in her two red hands; the other was Tid, the cobbler, bearing a slightly perceptible fragrance of candy in his hair.

THE LONGEST WAY AROUND, - -

By M. W. Hastings

The girl in the advertising department of the "Daily Record" looked up in amazement at the young reporter, then she read over the advertisment very carefully and aloud:

"WANTED: A young woman to eat Christmas dinner, at any place she may select, with a young man alone in the city. Must possess a refined bearing, a high-school education, and a sense of humor. Address Box 79, Daily Record. Can furnish best references."

"Yes, that's it," said Channing calmly. "See that it goes in tonight's paper, please. Christmas is only five days off."

"Is it a joke?"

"It's an adventure." Chaning smiled, the quick frank smile that with his close-cropped curls gave such an engaging air of youth to his face. It was one of his most valuable assets, this air of youth, though Channing never for a moment suspected that his success in obtaining photographs or interviews was due to anything but his masterly journalistic finesse.

"You mustn't say anything of this to the boys," he continued, as she filed the "ad" and made out his bill. "I don't want old Smith to hear of it. He was kind enough to ask me to dinner, but somehow that wasn't very—very convenient. He hesitated over the word, thinking of Smith's plump, assiduous sister. "So I told him I'd a previous engagement with a girl. Now I'm going to find her."

"What sort of a girl do you think would answer?" demanded Miss Erwin.

"I'm going to find out," he replied cheerfully.

Miss Erwin subtly amended the question. "What would think of a girl who did answer it?"

"Oh, that depends. If she was a nice girl, I'd think her so; if not——" He shrugged lightly. "Everything depends in this world. Theoretically, she be a bold young baggage, of course; but there's just a chance some modest young violet will rise to the occasion. You can never tell," he concluded sagely, "what the very nicest girl will do—on occasion."

Evidently the troubled waters of a great city had not yet quenched Chaning's boyish thirst for adventure. This joke was the sort of lance that youth loves to break with life, and the girl behind the desk smiled out at him in sympathtic undrstanding.

"You'll probably get a lean old art student," she prophesied. "Why don't you stipulate for beauty?"

"Lord, they'd all claim it!"

"I'd like to see your answers."

"Oh, you shall," promised Channing; "that is, if there are any."

There was no question about there being any however. When Channing investigated Box 709 next day, it seemed that Chicago sheltered innumerable young woman desirous of sharing that Christmas dinner, all superlatively attractive, educated above the ordinary, endowed with every accomplishment under heaven, as well as the required humor, and of a refinement beyond description. Many of the answers were illiterate; many too inviting; nine-tenths patiently impossible.

With one or two eliminations he carried the collection to Miss Erwin's desk the next noon hour, and she fell upon them with all the feminine zeal for exploration. Channing leaned against the desk, drawing little circles on her neat blotter—a thing that she abhorred, but against which she said nothing at all in reproof. One by one she laid the letters down in the same pile—the pile of the undeserving, Channing called it.

"Is that all?" she demanded disappointedly.

"Behold the possible tenth, the remnant of Israel that shall be saved!" He laid three more letters before her. One was on big gray paper in the typically bold script of the American girl. Miss Erwin took that first.

"My humor is vouched for in my answering this at all. The refinement of my bearing is apparent to the most casual observer, and my education I trust these few lines will bear in upon you. While not strinkingly handsome my bearing has not been found unpleasing. Frankly, I am alone in the city, and if you are the gentleman engaged on the humorous, if somewhat unconventional, quest that your advertisement suggests, I will meet you if you wish. Annie Wynne, General Delivery."

"That's rather possible, you know," commented Channing in tones of judicial care. "I should argue rather a merry, breezy individual, able to look after herself if need be—a brunette with a good deal of color, snappy eyes, and a touch of temper. Shall I take her?"

"If you like that kind." While not exactly cold, Miss Erwin's voice conveyed no palpable affinity for the brunette vision. She picked up the next, a little sheet of white note-paper.

"I am a girl earning my own living and living with relatives who are not congenial to me. I am not very pretty nor very clever, and I suppose I am not very refined or I would not be doing this; but there are times when I can't stand the routine of things any longer. There must be an adventure waiting somewhere, and I am ready to make a Christmas dinner with you that adventure. Ethel May, General Delivery."

"There is a discouraged girl," said Channing.

Miss Erwin studied the writing. "It sounds genuine," she admitted.

"It's uncommonly appealing." Channing was evidently forsaking the vivacious brunette. "That girl is a lady—shy and proud and a little gauche and colorless, but exquisitely sensitive. Things haven't gone right with her—you can see that."

"Do things ever go right with anybody?" murmured Miss Erwin, somewhat dryly. She was unfolding the third letter, on blue paper.

"My Dear Mr. Channing: You see I know you, though you don't know me at all. But I can safely promise that I am all your advertisement asks, and I have a few graces in addition. If you want to know who I am and how I knew your 'ad,' you will have to give me that Chrismas dinner. Mary Smith, General Delivery."

"There!" cried Channing. "What do you think of that? I believe you told somebody."

Miss Erwin met the accusation with eyes of angelic innocence. "I haven't told a soul," she vowed "You must have done it yourself."

"You bet I haven't," he returned vigorously. He paused, lost in thought. "I can't very well refuse that dare."

"I suppose not. Curiosity, pity, adventure, which will win?" she murmured, putting the three letters together and handing them to him. She waited a moment, then, with friendly, impersonal interest, asked,

"Instead of all this, why don't you take some nice girl you know?"

"The girls you know, are they ever as alluring as the girls you don't know?" queried Channing gayly.

Miss Erwin impaled a clipping on a file with vicious force. "There is such a thing as a pig in a poke," she reminded him somewhat dryly, then her face cleared and she chuckled softly to herself over her work.

Channing put the three letters into his pocket, sweeping the others into the waste-basket, and went off, declaring he would sleep on his decision.

The next morning he passed her desk before the rush of the work was fairly begun. She glanced up, pen in hand.

"Well, which is it to be?"

"All three."

"All three?"

"That's it." Channing positively radiated satisfaction. "I began to feel that whichever way I decided I'd be cheating the other two out of a meal; and then, too, there is a wise saw against putting all your eggs in one basket. So I wrote the brunette of the gray note-paper to meet me Christmas at twelve on the Art Institute steps for a preliminary hearing. The girl of the white note-paper I have asked to meet me at twelve-fifteen before the statue of Joan of Arc—a high-school education ought to carry her as far as that—and the lady who knows me so well is to linger in the north gallery at twelve-thirty. Christmas is Sunday and a free day; hence my choice."

"Oh, I should love to be there," gasped Miss Edwin.

"It isn't probable that more than two will be there," pursued Channing modestly, undisturbed by her mirth. "If they both suit, I'll take one then, and make a date with the other for the evening—eat two dinners if necessary!" he finished in a burst of sacrificial enthusiasm.

Miss Erwin suddenly buried her face in her hands, pink to the very roots of her dark hair, her shoulders shaking convulsively. It downed on Channing that she was really a very jolly, natural girl, but he didn't see what on earth she was so amused about.

. . . .

Christmas day dawned crisp and cold. Throughout the city men were at work clearing away the new-fallen snow, but on Michigan Avenue the lake-front lay yet undisturbed, glistening brightly in the sun. Tree and bushes were powdered with frozen snow and hung with delicate icicles glowing, prismatic-hued, in the light.

Channing strode briskly along the avenue. Directly before him lay the Art Institute, its broad gray masses lending themselves charmingly to large effects of light and shade. But Channing had no eye for architectural beauty at that moment. He was scanning the wide steps disguestedly enough where no merry brunette met his expectant gaze.

He walked on as far as the auditorium and then back, but though it was fifteen minutes past the hour, the steps were still empty. Wasting no more time upon the elusive lady of the gray note-paper, whose advertised virtues evidently did not include punctuality, Channing entered the building to discover if the other two were as deficient. Within, on the stairs leading to an upper gallery, a pair of bright, alert eyes were watching for him, but Channing saw them not at all; perhaps because their possessor, at his approach, shrank hurriedly out of sight.

Channing did not look up. He glanced again at his watch, straightened his tie, settled his coat collar, and with a vast ssumption of nonchalance, strolled toward the statue of Joan of Arc. In front of the figure stood a young woman, her absorption apparently as profound as his own. In one correctly gloved hand she held a catalogue, and her eyes moved constantly from the pace before her to the printed page, as if to verify her impressions.

Channing contemplaed her back dubiously. It was a very properly gowned back of slender proportions, but there was a definite suggestion of erectness, not to say rigidity, about it that stayed his approach. Finally, coughing discreetly behind his hand like the veriest amateur, he stepped forward.

"I beg your pardon, but—"

The young woman turned. Her eyes wandered calmly over his face with no ray of understanding to illumine her clear-cut features. She wore eyeglasses.

"I beg your pardon," he began again, "but aren't you expecting me?"

It was inanity itself, but mere masculinity could do no more in the glitter of those glasses.

"Do I look as if I expected you?" asked the spectacled person in zero accents.

"No," admitted Channing, with humility, "you do not." Then, unnecessarily enough, he continued to explain. "You see, I was to meet a girl here who wanted to go to dinner."

"I am not hungry," said the young woman, and turned her back on him and his explanations.

Channing fled into the north gallery and remained there for some time. Finally he emerged, still unaccompanied, and moved over to a strategic position near the stairs, gloomily surveying the deserted entrance. There was an ever-increasing rustle of silk behind him and the sound of descending footfalls. He turned to meet Miss Erwin.

"I couldn't stay away," she owned, laughing.

"It's mighty poor hunting. Did you see that?" Channing waved his hat eloquently in the direction of Joan of Arc.

Miss Erwin nodded, her eyes beaming with mischief. "It's not too late for the third," she told him consolingly.

"It's not too late for any of them according to a woman's idea of puntuality."

"Don't be scathing. At least I was on hand."

"You're a business woman and—"

"Busines women don't count," she finished quickly.

"Nonsense! I meant they were different."

"I don't feel very different," she murmured quizzically. She did not look very different either; the out-of-doors had restored the rosiness that office work was sapping. Her dark hair was waved and a scarlet toque, like a saucy winged bird, perched lightly upon it. It was very becoming. Channing did not remember having noticed her in a hat before.

The angular lady, who had moved from Joan to the kneeling Venus, crossed the building and raised cold, appraising eyes to the two at the stairs.

"She disapproves of me," said Miss Edwin with conviction. "She thinks I look as if I expected you."

Channing put his watch back into his pocket. "I refuse to linger on," he declared, with a lightness that could not entirely conceal a very natural chagrin. "The three fates have turned me down. If you'll permit me, I'll see you home."

Miss Erwin walked past the swinging doors before replying. Then she fixed her eyes thoughtfully upon the buildings opposite.

"My bearing, while not patrician," she murmured, in tones of pensive self-communion, "is not wholly uncultivated; my refinement——"

"Oh, I say!" Channing broke in with his merry, infectious laugh. "Will you eat that Christmas dinner? I thought you lived with your family, you know."

"My aunt," corrected Miss Erwin. "It's not just the same thing."

Nearly all the surrounding tables had changed occupants, but Miss Erwin and Channing lingered pleasantly on. Soft, blue smoke rings were floating lazily up over the young man's head, the comfort of an excellent dinner filled his soul with peace, and the glamour of the eternal feminine was gaining perceptibly upon his senses.

"Next time," said he, "we'll have a booth."

"Next Christmas?" smiled Miss Erwin.

"Next week."

"Oh!" Miss Erwin laughed mischievously. "Aren't you glad those girls didn't come?"

"I'm gratitude itself." He added, however, with sudden reflectiveness, "I wonder, though, why they didn't."

"Perchance one of them did."

"What!"

Channing's startled eyes sought her own in amazement; Channing's hand went slowly to his pocket and drew out three letters. From these he selected the one on blue stationery beginning, "My dear Mr. Channing."

"You wrote that?" he asked.

She clasped her hands in mock petition, "Mea culpa."

'Ho, I knew it all along," he said triumphantly.

"You didn't have an inkling," she averred placidly. She hesitated, then reached across to the letter in gray paper. "And that," she said, "and that."

"But—but they're so different!" There was no mistaking Channing's astonishment now.

"I am different."

From sheer bewilderment he bent his head and perused both notes in silence. Miss Erwin occupied herself in crumbling a cracker most untidily upon the tablecloth, with surreptitious glances in his direction. She looked a little like a scared child, uncertain whether to expect praise or blame.

"'While not strikingly handsome, my bearing has not been found unpleasing,'" read Channing aloud from the gray note.

"Well," she bristled defiantly, "I didn't say I was a breezy brunette, you know, with snappy eyes and a good deal of color. You made that up yourself."

"Oh, you fraud, you fraud!" Channing was chuckling explosively. He picked up the white note. "'—but there are times when I can't stand the routine of things any longer. There must be an adventure waiting somewhere ——'"

"Don't you dare laugh. That was genuine."

"And you sat there and let me——"

"Let you call me 'gauche and colorless, but exquisitely sensitive!' Oh dear! oh dear! I feel somehow as if I'd cheated you." She added more soberly, after a pause, "but I haven't really. You picked out my notes yourself, and the others were simply rubbish. You couldn't have dined with one of them."

Her eyes were very bright and her cheeks were very pink, but that was not why Channing looked so long. A deeper charm drew him—the charm of fine intelligence and a brave spirit, and beneath all the merry comradeship a hint of something sweeter, truer yet.

"Ah, well," said he enigmatically enough, as he pocketed the three notes with elaborate, ostentatious care, "the longest way around is occasionally the shortest way home."

LEFT TO TIME.

Fertile must be the imagination of the citizen who successfully evades doing his duty on the jury. A man on one occasion appeared before the judge and exclaimed pleadingly:

"Sir, if you can excuse me, pray do. I don't know which will die first—my wife or my daughter!"

"Dear me, that's sad," said the judge. "Certainly, you are excused."

The next day the man was met by one of the jurors, who in a sympathetic voice asked:

"How's your wife?"

"She's all right. Why do you ask?"

"And your daughter?"

"She's all right, too. Why do you ask?"

"Why, yesterday you told the judge that you did not know which would die first."

"Nor do I. That is a question time alone can answer."—Cassell's Journal.

"The reason you don't smypathize with me is that you have never been disappointed in love yourself."

"I haven't eh? That's all you know. Why, I once advertised for a wife with a million dollars, and I never got a single reply." — Philadelphia Press.

THE RATE PER CENT.

"Smith takes more interest in his business than any one I know."

"What's his business?"

"He runs a pawnshop."—Illustrated Bits.

RULE OF CONTRARIES.

Miss Silhouette—Wonder why the artist is always so fond of drawing dark women?

Mr. Allblack—Probably his wife's a blonde.—Illustrated Bits.

BASE SLANDER.

"Your husband," said Mrs. Highmus graciously, "is decidedly interesting and original, even if he does sometimes blow his own horn a little too"—

"It isn't so!" indignantly exclaimed Mrs. Gaswell. "My husband always uses his handkerchief!"